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Las Vegas SUN

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Perchlorate safety standards not assured, researcher says

By Mary Manning

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Despite ongoing studies costing more than \$2.2 million, no one yet knows the health effects of perchlorate in drinking water, an Air Force major says.

Perchlorate is a chemical used in rocket fuel that is manufactured in Southern Nevada at a plant near Henderson. It has been found in area drinking water at levels that are now considered safe.

Nevada, California, and federal health officials say chemical analysis of water that reveals perchlorate at the level of 18 parts per billion is safe for public consumption.

But Maj. Daniel Rogers, who is spearheading research efforts on the chemical that is contaminating drinking water in Nevada, California and Utah, said that standard may not protect public health.

Rogers spoke Thursday at a meeting of the Lake Mead Water Quality Forum at the Clark County Government Center. The Forum, which meets once a month, formed a year ago after citizens and experts became concerned over contamination in the Las Vegas Wash and Lake Mead, Southern Nevada's major supply of drinking water. Forum members represent federal, state and local agencies, environmental groups and industry.

Scientists with the Environmental Protection Agency established a provisional "safe" level of perchlorate in drinking water at between four and 18 parts per billion. California researchers concurred with that level after conducting tests in April 1997.

California and Nevada accepted the 18 parts per billion level after perchlorate, a rocket fuel additive, was detected in the Colorado River as high as 9 parts per billion at water intake pipelines, Rogers said.

Since then the Department of Defense, the EPA, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and the American Water Association have raised the funding to launch a series of studies that will not be completed until 2002, he said.

"Shouldn't the level in drinking water be zero?" asked biologist Larry Paulson, a Forum member.

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Although reverse osmosis and ion exchange will remove perchlorate, no one knows if drinking perchlorate over a long period of time will harm people, Rogers said. Perchlorate is used to treat over-active thyroid glands.

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"We know that we don't have the answer on health effects, and zero may be the answer," Rogers said.

Both health effects and environmental impacts, such as perchlorate absorbed by orange trees in Florida and California, are under study, he said. In addition, researchers are trying to find the best way to remove it from groundwater near military bases, space shuttle facilities and manufacturers such as Kerr-McGee Corp. and the former Pacific Engineering & Production Co. near Henderson.

Those two plants are contributing perchlorate to the Las Vegas Wash, located about six miles upstream from the valley's drinking water intake pipe. Perchlorate levels reached 16 parts per billion in December, but have dropped to 14 parts per billion in raw water in January.

No method has yet been approved for removing perchlorate from large bodies of water.

Barry Greene, general manager of Hydro-Physical Technologies Inc. of Las Vegas, presented a removal technique developed from mining operations. Small-scale tests are running in Hawaii and other locations, he said.

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